



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

GAYHEART

A STORY OF DEFEAT

BY DANA BURNET

I

GAYHEART came in June, I saw his heels
Go through the door, and broken heels they were.
His eyes were big, and blue, and young. He said,
"Could you direct me to the Basement, Sir?"

I knew the Basement; I had grubbed there once
Before a client tumbled in my net
And brought me riches. It was coffin-cold
And on its bare walls seeped a moldy sweat.

'Twas next the kitchen, too, and had the breath
Of cheap things cooking—but I led him down.
The stairs dropped naked through the clammy dark—
He paused, and gasped, as men do when they drown.

"Is it down there?" I turned and took his arm
(Thin as a boy's it was; all skin and bone);
I said: "The dark is just a pleasant cloak
To veil you off, and keep your thoughts alone.

"A Boarding-House is all-inquisitive;
You're safer here." "How did you know," he said,
"That I would want to be alone? Am I
An open book to be so simply read?"

We stumbled down until I felt the door
Beneath my fingers. Then I struck a light—
The room grinned at us like an ugly face
Caught in a heart-beat from the cloak of night.

The boy's breath cracked his lips. I saw his soul
Stand in his eyes, and look, and shrink again,
Sick with the moment's shattered visionings,
And on his face went the slow feet of pain.

"It strikes you bleak, eh? Come, it's not so bad.
The gas won't whimper if you turn it low.
The bed is lame, but friendly. Here's a desk
To scribble at." He said: "I write, you know.

"I've come to be a writer." And he smiled,
As boys do when they say their heart's desire;
"I'm from the South—a paper took me on,
But that's just keeping fagots in my fire."

He smiled again, for he had all his youth
To smile from. "My real work," he said, "will be
To sketch the city—not in prosy books,
But in its native, living poetry.

"Cities were made for measures and for rhyme,
They have an ancient minstrelsy of feet,
And rivers sweep their shipping like a song,
And there is endless music in a street.

"Endless, I say, and never caught by man.
Your books? Ah, how they walk, walk, walk, with words;
But verse runs on light feet, as Cities do—
O God, I've dreamed it till it hurts like swords

"Not to be writing; but I've got to learn,
Learn, learn it all—the streets, the parks, the ships,
The subway and the skyscrapers!" He stopped
And brushed his hand across his trembling lips.

"Excuse me, sir. You were the first kind soul
I'd spoken to—the rest are like the tomb."
He smiled and touched my hand; and then I turned,
Leaving him standing in his wistful room.

II

June passed, and weather came that seared our flesh.
The soft streets crawled; old men dropped down and died;
Within the House our summer tempers snarled,
And every night the lady boarder cried.

Her alcove shouldered mine—and so I knew.

She came at six, her feet as slow as lead
Dragged through her door, and cried till supper-time.
I never saw her but her eyes were red.

Poor Gayheart whitened slowly, till his face

Was like the paper that he scribbled on.
But he had youth, and some vague bravery
That held him taut until his task was done.

He rasped our nerves, though, with his restless ways,

His restless, silent ways. . . . He never seemed
To see us when we passed him in the hall—
His eyes were distant with the things he dreamed.

He bolted dinner like a dog, as though

He feared his fate would snatch him unaware
With all his dreams unproved—then, starting up,
Would grope the shadowed hallway to the stair,

And down to his eternal folderol,

His spitting gaslight and his scratching pen,
Until we cursed him for his industry,
His being different from the ruck of men.

Then one dark night when all the stars did sweat

He plucked my sleeve, and smiled, and drew me down
His damned black stairs. Then, while the clogged jet whined,
He read me what he'd written of the Town.

It struck me wonderful. It had the ache

Of rush-hour traffic in it, and the swing
Of wheels, as though he'd listened in a street,
A crowded street where life ran thundering. . . .

It made me think of going to my work;

Of men in crowds, and women's faces drawn
With painted lines, and jaunty hats and ships,
And skyscrapers that reached up for the dawn.

And then beneath the step of rhyme I heard

The boy's soul speaking. . . . And I knew that he
Had spent himself like dust among the crowd

To catch the heart-beat for his poetry.

His voice went out like flame. I found myself
Shocked by the still, small room. To me it seemed
Great throngs had passed with various noise. He said:
"That's just the gateway to the thing I've dreamed!"

III

There is a street's end, where the coasters sleep,
And there, at twilight, purple waters run,
And o'er their breast the crimson-coated day
Trails the last silver of the fallen sun.

A wall is there, for men to dream upon;
And so young Gayheart went, with all his scars
Unhealed . . . and saw the lights sown through the dusk,
And his tall city in a cloak of stars.

Tier upon tier the golden windows burned,
As though man sought new freedom in the skies;
And somehow, lured by starlight and by dawn,
Built his blind cities up to paradise!

Afar the bridges spun their silver webs,
The mellow whistles talked along the stream;
But Gayheart leaned athirst upon a stone,
Hurt with the shining beauty of his dream.

And he was like a child with wistfulness,
Holding his hands out through the summer night,
Where in the dusk the great, clean towers flared,
Like swords thrust up in some red battle-light!

And then he turned, all dumb with his desire,
And stumbled through still streets, until he found
The great bridge trembling underfoot and heard
The trains go by him with a tempest sound.

Black, shapeless forms came shrieking with bright eyes;
The sea-wind rolled like drums against his ears,
And he was singing, singing as he trod,
And in his eyes were sudden, smarting tears.

The tallest spire enraptured him! He strode
Under the roofed bridge, where the newsboys cry,
And out into that little breathing-space
From whence the windows go into the sky.

And there he sought a bench and sat him down,
Between two snoring vagabonds, who lay
Sprawled on their faces, . . . but his wakefulness
Was like a lamp within him till the day.

What did it mean? the stone flung like a song?
The desk-light brothering the star? The whole
Up-sweep of roofs that is our native land—
What meaning had it, and what secret soul?

He sat with upturned eyes, as young men do,
Until the lamp upon his face grew wan;
He saw his nation toiling in its House,
Its tall, strange House that reached up for the dawn!

And dreaming, saw the Elder Worlds asleep
In their low houses, beautiful with Time. . . .
The vagrant at his left side groaned and breathed,
Lifting a face of cumulative grime—

"What's in yer gizzard, lad, that twists ye so?
I know! You're one of them wot's got a brain!
Now me—" His brother raised a blowzy head:
"Aw, hell!" he snarled, and fell asleep again.

Across the roofs the first, faint gold of dawn
Streaked the dun heavens, and the Day Men took
The windows of the sleepless, so that life
Went smoothly like a never-written book.

And Gayheart shook the cramps from his dull limbs,
Rose and went up the paper's curling stair
Until he reached the City Room. The Staff,
Half stripped of cloth, already sweated there.

But he dropped at his crazy, limping desk,
In the dim corner where the cubs are kept,
And wrote: "*America is wakefulness!*"
And fell face down upon the words, and slept.

IV

Gayheart's book came back, and back again,
And still he mailed it out, with little lies
To cloak its failure—but I think we saw
The naked, frightened soul behind his eyes.

The lady boarder knew. I heard her say
A cruel thing: "Your book is home," she said,
"For Sunday dinner." But he passed her by
Without the slightest turning of his head.

She hated him. . . . And so mid-autumn fell,
With no abating coolness. Each new sun
Was like a murderer let out of locks,
And life went sickly, praying to be done.

A night fell when all sleep was vain. . . . I rose
And stumbled to the windowful of stars,
That was my share of heaven. . . . There I stood
Letting the soft night seep into my scars.

The window opened on a little court,
And suddenly a feeble thrust of flame
Stabbed like a pettish dagger through the dark,
Out of the night a ragged breathing came.

. . . I saw the Basement boarder stooping down,
His lean face bloodied with the touch of light.
A tongue of fire licked his hands . . . and died,
Brief as the flutter of a star in flight.

Somehow I sensed a tragedy. . . . The gloom
Was like a grave, the light leaped up no more.
I turned and groped down through the breathless house;
Until I saw him crouching by his door.

He stood there, staring at his empty hands
As though they'd done his dearest dream to death;
The palms were soiled and smeared with paper ash;
There was a reek of whisky on his breath.

"What's this?" I said. He raised his head and smiled
With a deep drunkenness that touched his soul.
"I'll tell you what it is! I've been a fool—
The sort of fool that makes a dream his goal.

"I've worked my heart out; done a decent thing—
And no one wants it! No one wants to look
Beneath the surface of this world of ours.
It's all damned artifice. . . . I've burned my book."

Even to me the thing seemed tragical—

As though he'd set a torch to half himself.

"What!" I cried, "burned your splendid poetry?

Laid yourself out like that upon a shelf?

"What will you do?" "I'll do as other men;

Harness my talent as a modern should.

I'll do the obvious with all my age—

The cheap, the counterfeit, the understood!

"I've a new job this night; a fine, new job—"

He spat into the shadows of the place—

"Verse-making on a magazine! The sort

That wears a painted simper on its face.

"I'm rich . . . and drunk. I had to drink or scream,

And drink goes deep with me; . . . get me to bed.

I've slaughter on my soul—and verse to make.

My editor wants—something light—he said—

"Something that's brisk and—funny." There he stood,

With those raw, suffering eyes and stared at me,

Until I near cried out. He was so white!

And older . . . older than a man should be.

I swear whole ages crumbled in his face,

For he had dreamed, and dreams are ancient things,

Bearing a harsher reckoning than Time

When once despair has crumpled up their wings.

I got him stripped and into bed at last,

The poor, spent lad! He lay there still and stark,

His smudged hands clenched across his shallow chest,

And moaned once as I crept out through the dark.

Success came to him swiftly; made him drunk.

He gulped life as a drunkard gulps his bowl,

Forgetting all his splendid futile dreams—

He was an altered person to his soul.

He fattened and grew flushed; he learned to sneer;

His verses ran like swift, malignant flame,

Smirching the thing they touched and burning on

To wipe the pathway for his striding fame.

He left the Basement then; soared up two flights
With braggart wings, bought furniture and prints,
Nonsense, we called it!—and to crown the show
Decked out his trappings in a flowered chintz.

But that phase passed. His true self's tide flowed back,
We saw him drowning in his own strange deeps;
A crawling restlessness crept from his eyes,
The sort of serpent thing that never sleeps.

A month or two he clung to his gay nest,
Beat his wings breathlessly within a shell,
Made himself live with all his flaunted things,
Grim as a tortured convict in a cell.

And then his self's self conquered. . . . One May night
When earth was breathing fragrance to its core,
And open windows drank the breath of Spring,
He came and stood within my open door.

"Please," he said, "would you mind?" . . . And there he stopped,
Sucking his cheeks in like a timid boy.
"I've gone back to the Basement. . . . I've gone back!
The other room made life seem just a toy.

"And that's not right. . . . There's something more to life
Than turning it to playthings. . . . I've gone back,
To find my book again, to do the work
I'd planned to do according to my knack."

"Your book," I said, "your book? You burned it, boy!"
He flinched. "I know. I feel its ashes still
Here on my hands. That's what I want of you—
I know that you can help me if you will."

His tone was light, and yet I heard him breathe
As men do in the ache and grip of strife.
I rose and went with him. Again he said,
"There's something more than toys to make of life."

The Basement, with its yellow tooth of light,
Grinned at us like a long-familiar face,
Whose daily wont of ugliness, revealed,
Mounts to a sin within the moment's space.

Its gaping door still breathed the winter's chill,
Its single window level with the street
Flickered with fragments of the passing world,
Hummed with whispered drudgery of feet.

And yet to him its very barrenness
Was like a savage penance. Standing there
He bruised himself upon its ugliness
Until the sweat stood out beneath his hair.

"I asked you down," he said, "to help me think,
To help remember." Once again the sweat
Stood out on him, and as I looked I knew
It was his soul had made his body wet.

He gripped me with the hunger of his eyes,
Hard as a knife his glance was, hard as steel.
"How did it go?—My book? I've thought and thought
Until my brain is like a going wheel."

I stared at him in sudden choking pain.
"Boy!" I said. "For my life—" He cried, "You must!
It's all behind a door inside your mind;
It's there, if you will brush aside the dust!

"My own mind's locked against me. Now and then
A line comes back, a bare crumb at the most.
My plan, my meaning—all the soul within
Peers with faded features of a ghost."

"It was the Town," I said, "in all its guise.
The Town! It was the crowds along the street;
Faces and spires and stately ships and dreams,
Desires, and winnings, and I think—defeat."

"Defeat," he gasped, "defeat!" And then he dropped
Down at his palsied desk and bowed his head
Upon his arms. . . . I felt my flesh grow cold
As though that gesture meant a man struck dead.

"Oh," he said, from the prison of his arms,
"What god would wreck a man with one mistake?
Give him two selves and to each self a sword
So he's half slain or ever he's awake!"

He raised his haggard face. "In every man
 There is division of the dust and dream,
 And Youth is just the crossing of the swords
 Before he takes his place within the scheme.

"The Town's a citadel for all things flesh,
 And yet a man might storm it with a song,
 Played he not traitor to himself. . . . I quit,
 And oh, it was the quitting that was wrong!

"I was so lonely for a thing to love,
 A single look, a passing word of praise—
 I was as near to triumph as a smile,
 And now defeat, defeat for all my days!

"Cities are cruel things," he whispered then,
 "Their slaves are Failure, and their gods Defeat."
 In at the window came a thrust of wind,
 Bearing the weary music of the street. . . .

He leaped up with an oath. His hand shot out,
 Snapped off the light. I saw his hot eyes burn,
 Then blackness. . . . Came his whisper through the dark,
 "I would to God that I had never dreamed."

The years go slowly in a boarding-house,
 Sharpened with neither passions nor despairs;
 Time seems to falter in those dim, gray halls—
 The days are only footsteps on the stairs.

The Basement yawned for tenants, but none came;
 It seemed completer for its emptiness.
 Gayheart had been its last. . . . To me the room
 Still wore the mantle of his soul's distress.

I never saw his face but once again;
 It was a sharp cold midnight in the fall;
 Broadway lay flaming like a polished sword,
 As though one night were given to flame its all.

The theaters, bright-mouthed, poured forth a stream
 Of pallid faces that the glare struck dead.
 The street crawled, and the noise went up to God
 In formless cries, like some great need unsaid.

The buffet of false brightness swept the night
With rosy blushes to the firmament.
Here ran the riot of a hoarded world,
Here life was only reckoned to be spent!

And here, carved in that graceless art of fire,
Stood Gayheart's name, a star's height o'er the street.
His words came back to me as clear as bells,
"*Their slaves are Failure, and their gods Defeat!*"

Was this defeat, then? Was his fame defeat?
I knew the sort of comic thing he'd done.
Had he forgot those ashes on his hands?
Had he by hard forgetting played and won?

Then suddenly I saw him in the crowd,
Beneath that scarlet flaunting of his name.
A smooth, smug mask of flesh was on him now;
He was the very creature of his fame.

His boyishness had died. . . . His hard, clean youth
Was gone for ever 'neath a whelm of clay.
Yet as I looked I saw him lift his head,
And all his grossness seemed to fall away.

His hungry look went straight to Heaven's throne,
High up into the folded book of stars,
And on his face I saw the Quest again—
He was the seeker, fainting with his scars!

One glimpse and he was gone, . . . a soul blown on
And lost at last beneath those painted skies.
Yet he still lives! There never dawns a day
But I behold him in the City's eyes.

DANA BURNET.